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# THE DEATH OF SEMIOTICS (IN LATE MODERN ARCHITECTURE), THE CORRUPTION OF METAPHOR (IN POST-MODERNISM), THE BIRTH OF THE *PUNCTUM* (IN NEOMANIA)

By Douglas Davis ☒

*Conversely, if interest is focused not on the epidermis but on the structural skeleton, rendering it independent of function and form, then unexplained horizons are opened up. True, the Principle of Form is destroyed, but it is replaced by a structure as a field, open to multi-use and to linguistic pluralism (and hence to user participation). That is to say, the notion of neo-avantgarde takes the form of a radical anti-formalism: an explosive widening of development towards the phenomenon of de-artisticization.*

—Aldo Rossi, 1983<sup>1</sup>



*It may therefore be that the rule we feel the need of is first and foremost the desire to think of our actions as necessary. That is, the desire for meaningful simplicity, amidst the noise of the world.*

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—Vittorio Gregotti, 1982<sup>2</sup>

*The programs of the center will focus on contemporary experimentation, collaboration, and production rather than the programs of the traditional museums . . .*

—Program of Requirements, Center of the Visual Arts Design Competition, Ohio State University, 1983



**EVEN THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER** seen the drawings or models of the winning entry in last year's competition for the Ohio State Visual Arts Center are saying that it has broken the modernophobic chain of recent history. Though I was a committed juror, I deny it. But the perception itself, being widely held, is a signal event. Why? What is it about the design that has loosed the floodgates of a new rhetoric—or, to put it precisely, a familiar, lately rejected rhetoric? Of course the answer is complex, reaching back beyond this moment, like ripples spreading across a lake from a forgotten stone thrown long ago. Yet the answer might be stated immediately—and metaphorically—in the linguistic terms misappropriated years ago by architects, artists, and their critics. If the sign and the signifier became fused in the “high” Modern period—when ornament and symbolism were nailed deep down inside the structure itself—they have properly divided, in the Visual Arts Center, after many fitful and failed attempts elsewhere. You can see them separated in the ghostly columns of the old Armory resurrected by Peter Eisenman, the main designer, beside the long grid-sheathed glass column that snakes out behind them. Signified here, signifier there. Social Realism here, functional abstraction there. That Eisenman probably did not intend or really believe in this split at all is beside the point. It is a delicious riposte to the riddle we shall unravel, which begins to pose itself, properly, in 1894.

*To follow those waters . . .*

Which will henceforth lead us into strange lands . . .

In vain I showed the Calumet . . .

To explain that we had not come as enemies . . .

Passing two leagues up the river we resolved to winter there . . .

Being detained by my illness . . .

The De Profundis *was intoned . . . the body was then carried to the church.*

—Bronze plaques at the entrance to the Marquette Building, Chicago, 1894

The contrast between the stately images that accompany these solemn words and the official landmark plaque inside the door is the first clue to our riddle. On the outside of the Marquette Building in the center of Chicago, we are immediately addressed by the narrative theme carved into the bronze panels over the doors. Inside, the words are flat, clipped, and impersonal: “Marquette Building, Holabird and Roche, Architects, 1894. In this building an appropriate exterior expression for the new skeleton-framed skyscraper was found. The facade clearly reveals its underlying structure with broad windows set in a framework of narrow piers and spandrels . . . National Historic Landmark, Department of Interior, 1980.” But what can be seen of those broad windows, narrow piers, and spandrels is left to the rare viewers who look at the Marquette as a whole, from at least a block away. What happens to almost every observer entering this building is a mockery of the statement on the plaque. Up close, which is how we enter any structure, the eye and mind are plunged into the saga of Père Marquette, the French explorer who explored the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers in the 17th century, not the delights of the skeleton-framed support. In the lobby we are confronted by a brilliant mother-of-pearl mural ringing our heads. Simply to ascend the staircase or catch an elevator, we must pass through its swirling imagery and floating words. Once again it is the saga of Marquette, the intrepid hero finding his way through the wilderness, attempting to wage reconciliation with the Indians, fighting against disease: “Firmly resolved to

do all and to suffer all for so glorious an enterprise . . . they answered that they were Illinois . . . in token of peace presented the pipe to smoke . . . to die as he had always asked . . . in a wretched cabin. . . .” Beneath each of the pearls on the Tiffany mural there is gold leaf, causing the light to bounce and glitter; other pearls are translucent. Over the bronze elevator doors there are fierce, lifelike heads in relief, bearing Indian or French names: Little Panther . . . Chicagou . . . Talon . . . Joliet . . . Big Snake . . . De Manthet . . . War Eagle . . . La Salle . . . Black Hawk.

As architecture, the Marquette is narrative theater. It tells its story over and over, on crowded days, on lonely days, when the light is high in the sky, when the sun is low, completely shut off by the surrounding skyscrapers. There is barely a minute on the busy days when a visitor or a pedestrian is not examining the mural’s words as he or she walks—or stops short, simply to *read*. That this careful scrutiny takes place without benefit of critical or historical coaching is yet another clue to our riddle. You will examine the histories of architecture in vain for reference to this mural or to the relief carvings outside. If you see the Marquette Building mentioned at all, it is simply because Holabird and Roche’s hidden skeleton marked yet another of the plodding steps taken between 1880 and 1920 toward the transformation of architecture into engineering. The official guide *Chicago’s Famous Buildings* (published by the University of Chicago Press in 1980) does not even bother to illustrate the mural of the lobby, offering only a distant view of the repetitive window patterns that rise above the entrance. A lonely sentence is granted—within a long paragraph—to “brilliant mosaics in the lobby.”

Yet this is surely the most extraordinary act of architecture in Chicago in the 19th century. Extraordinary because the Marquette contradicts the semiotic premise of architecture as it has evolved since the 17th century, nearing its radical articulation in Chicago during the 1880s and ’90s. Let us not forget that the architects here, James Holabird and John Roche, had nothing to do with Marquette’s mural, which has been lately restored by a team led by Walker Johnson, of the descendant firm Holabird and Root. It was

commissioned and orchestrated by the developer, Owen Aldis, who, it is said, had translated Marquette's journals on his own. Why? No one knows. Or cares.

*The very word "modern" expresses something continuously shifting, like the shadow of a person who is walking. How can one free oneself from one's shadow?*

—Paolo Portoghesi, *After Modern Architecture*, 1980

*In Europe such an exposition [the Museum of Modern Art's "Modern Architecture," 1932] would probably have been founded on assumptions about the ideological basis of modern architecture. However, the political and social content of modern architecture, issues which so consumed European architects, were all but unmentioned in Hitchcock and Johnson's exhibition.*

—David Handlin, 1982<sup>3</sup>

Modernism itself is shadowed by semiotics, the implications of which are a condition of its last, most reductive phase. Both Modernism and semiotics waxed and waned in this century; both were committed to interiority, to the means—of language and structure—as their own end. As the semiotician is committed to grammar, not to meaning (a semantic concern), the Modernist architect is committed to the frame, to ground zero, in effect, which is the final authorizing element for architecture itself. Ironically, history tells us that neither the architect nor the client nor the critic ostensibly devoted to semiotics has been able to leave the frame—the “signifier”—alone. Each has been forced to produce the “signified” as a matter of strategic necessity, over and over. In the beginning, the signified element was coded in social and political rhetoric. Walter Gropius' Fagus Factory (1911) and Mies van der Rohe's proposal for an all-glass-on-glass tower (Berlin, 1920–21) were theoretically devised to elevate the conditions of those who worked in them. But in time the signified came to be seen as transparent, at one with the

signifier, coded in material rhetoric, save in certain instances—housing, for example, where reductionist design was justified on the ground of economy—which prompted public questioning. The glass-and-metal curtain wall exists, we were told, simply because the frame needs a skin. In this sense, semiotics is the curtain wall of Modernism, Modernism is the skeleton behind the wall. Jean Piaget saw this evolution coming a long time ago, and welcomed it. Properly applied, he said, structuralism proceeds to the conclusion that structures are self-sufficient without outside reference: i.e., the acceptance of the notion of “deep structure” leads inevitably to formalism. By 1932, in the canonical introduction of Modern architecture in the United States (at the Museum of Modern Art), this evolution was complete. Had they been aware of its terminal significance, both Piaget and Claude Levi-Strauss (who saw the unconscious mind engaged primarily in “imposing form upon content”) would have been delighted. Another way of stating the point is this: Modern architecture begat the primacy of style. This habit of mind is still with us, lurking behind the closet door that post-Modernism—which might be considered the final style of Stijls—has become.

But of course the structuralist view of language is imperiled. The recent trauma of poststructuralist linguistics is caused by a necessary shift from semiotic to semantic values. But it is only in this direction that linguistics can move and maintain the rigor of serious investigation. By now it is clear that “deep structure” cannot be defined on any ground that allows or encourages elaborated or orchestrated thinking, in linguistics, art, or architecture. If “deep-seated universals” do exist, their functions are so simple that they discourage further research (the “pro-verb” is one example lately advanced; the prevalence of the subject-verb-object sentence is another).<sup>4</sup> No, it is on the “surface” level, where language engages meanings, that new theoretical energy thrives. If the valid formal structure of language, of the skeleton behind the facade, is innocuous, its content—the attempt to transcend structural origins—is not. Even in the postformalist United States it is impossible to forbid the perceiver from attempting to see language, art, or architecture as meaning. Slowly, surely, our perception of language as an independent, self-enclosed entity is changing. Recent studies indicate that

children learn to handle language in a social context, totally divorced from the unreal void assumed by Modernist semioticians. They vary modes of address, intonation, and body language, depending on the needs of the audience and the moment. Whatever its intention, the work of art and of architecture is engaged in a similar, irretrievably social process. That the process is hazardous—that the search for the signified is in the best of circumstances difficult—does not negate its inevitability.

*The [Eiffel] Tower and the Statue of Liberty represent the two poles toward which structure gravitates at the end of the nineteenth century. In the first case, structure is the sufficient and necessary condition of meaning; in the second, the structure is purely “enabling” and plays no part in the object as a sign.*

—Alan Colquhoun, 1978<sup>5</sup>

*During the past fifty years the scope of collecting as a whole has been extended beyond the eighteenth century, beyond the nineteenth, beyond even the turn-of-the-century art nouveau style . . . and has now reached the interwar period of the 1920's and 1930's.*

—J. Stewart Johnson, 1972<sup>6</sup>

If the structure in architecture meant anything beyond itself, the signified would be available beyond the Modernist code—that is, it could be read or experienced by means of generally available codes, as we read that story of Marquette by benefit of history and language. In late-Modernist architecture, there is a desperate attempt to violate the sanctity of semiotic abstraction. On the 27th floor of Kevin Roche's and John Dinkeloo's U.N. Plaza Hotel (1975) in New York we pass through a space that violates functional rectitude with careless impunity. It is a tiny corridor barely 7 feet long, 3 feet wide. Immediately to the left is a transparent curtain wall which vividly frames the huge city below; immediately to the right is a mirror wall: close your eyes or lose the sense of balance for an instant and you find



yourself suspended in midair, a Superperson reborn. This is not a space that signifies either itself or its components. The pair of sliced trapezoidal towers that reach toward each other in Houston's Pennzoil Place (Philip Johnson and John Burgee, 1976) are similarly free of semiotic meaning. Think of the pitched cantilevered facade of I.M. Pei's City Hall in Dallas (1977), leaning forward as if about to fall, or the curved serpentine wall of curtain glass that confronts the street in Ipswich, England, placed there by Norman Foster for Willis, Faber, and Dumas in 1974. Neither the cantilever facade nor the sinuous curve are *required* by the support structure. They are effronteries of design. These structures—and their countless colleagues, reared in city after city throughout the '70s—violated the Modernist insistence on the merging of the signifier and the signified. In its last, most violent phase, Modern architecture explodes like a red star, spraying its signifiers through the void. In the absence of any figurative or conceptual intention, the meaning of these acts is inherent in their ambition, not in their fidelity to structure.

In late Modernism, the structure is no longer its own sign. The structure is suspended at a point just short of metaphorical action. Insofar as the sign has any coded meaning at all, it is simply as the violation of structure, as if the Eiffel Tower raised a torch in the air but did not bother to put on a robe, thus becoming a denuded Statue of Liberty. Roche's and Dinkeloo's College Life Insurance buildings in Indianapolis (1971) perfectly illustrate this figure. We see three pyramidal masses as we approach, sculpted and arranged for no apparent purpose other than appearance. But the appearance is not yet accepted as independent meaning. In no sense are Roche's and Dinkeloo's U.N. Plaza Hotel corridor, their College Life Insurance triad, Pei's City Hall, or even Cesar Pelli's long, low, beached "Blue Whale" in Los Angeles—the Pacific Design Center (1971), a shopping arcade ringed on top by an immense barrel vault—metaphorical structures. They are simply gestures toward an architecture of appearance.

It was not until the arrival in the '60s of Michael Graves and Peter Eisenman that there was a deliberate attempt to decode Modernism. By which time, the high Modern style—as practiced by Gropius, Mies, Le Corbusier, Gerrit



Rietveld, and even early Skidmore, Owings. and Merrill—was a period code. Barely a decade after Stewart Johnson's landmark essay, the lean and clean Luckhardt chair (1925) has been placed on sale by Lord and Taylor in its antiques department; the glass-boxed Lever House on Park Avenue has been certified as an *objet d'histoire* by the New York City Landmarks Commission; and Stanley Tigerman has erected an 18-story apartment building in Chicago at the intersection of Montrose and Broadway, where its shadow falls just to the edge of Mies van der Rohe's grave in Graceland Cemetery, 250 yards away.

*Metaphor refers to an operation that links a message, by the selection or substitution of its elements . . . through a code, a connection between elements present in the message and elements absent from the message which could be substituted for them.*

—Mario Gandelsonas, 1972<sup>7</sup>

*The first speaker [at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, New York] was imported from Rome for the occasion. . . . Poor dear, he probably had jet lag or culture shock. . . . he talked for such a long time in a voice that sounded like he'd taken a few quaaludes. I do remember that he used the word metaphor a lot. Dear God—why is everything a metaphor for something else?*

—B.J. Archer, 1981<sup>8</sup>

*The so-called post-modern architects are merely feeding the media-society with gratuitous quietistic images rather than proferring, as they claim, a creative appel à l'ordre after the supposedly proven bankruptcy of the liberative modern project. . . . As Andreas Huyssens has written, "The American post-modernist avant-garde . . . is not only the end-game of avant-gardism. It . . . represents . . . the decline of critical adversary culture."*

—Kenneth Frampton, 1983<sup>9</sup>

Certainly “metaphor” is now central—as a critical term—to the discourse surrounding what has come to be known as Post-Modern architecture. Certainly by now the neoconservative critical army has definitively established a link between the work of designers like Graves, Robert Venturi, Robert Stern, Charles Gwathmey, Richard Meier, Pelli, and, in the later phase, Johnson and Roche, among others, with revivalist theory, with a soft, unquestioning, and arbitrary recall of historical elements. Often the distinction is made by these critics between the literal (or Modernist) and the figurative (or pre-Modernist) traditions, in favor of the latter. Graves’ work is particularly susceptible to this analysis; indeed, he openly encourages it when he speaks of “halls” and “doorknobs” as “elements” in his “language.” It is no wonder that in 1972 Mario Gandelsonas welcomed his work—and Eisenman’s—as a means of rereading architecture. “Both Eisenman and Graves approach architecture as a system of signification,” he claimed. But their systems reveal themselves upon reflection as introspective, as well as widely disparate. Graves’ coding is explicit. All of his elements speak openly of their historic or biologic references. Eisenman’s coding is implicit. His walls, columns, and windows commonly referred—in *Houses I* through *X* (designed between 1968 and 1981)—to each other; often, indeed, these elements supported nothing, led nowhere, and depicted blankness. They resembled the forms of generative grammar, not yet transformed into coherent language.

But. If we mean by “metaphor” a sign or symbol that mediates between the literal and the figurative, what lies behind the facade of this work? You will read deep and long in the revivalist literature provoked by Post-Modernism to find any reference to content or meaning. If Graves and Eisenman represent its divergent cutting edges, they simply begin to address issues beyond form—that is, semantics. The only clear one-to-one symbol provided in Graves’ work is the copper figure of Portlandia, on the facade of his Portland building. Even so, the formalist could argue that she is so broad and civic a figure that she in fact refutes meaning, or reading, as does the

Statue of Liberty. Elsewhere, Graves' historical references—the classical columns, baroque-relief porches, painted murals, and art deco tiling—are too rich, too variegated to signify any truth or thought beyond stylistic panache. Eisenman in his early houses might well be considered a stylistic eclectic in reverse: his determined use of reductive geometry, monochromatic tones, and post-functional elements are as dense, as crowded, as Graves' willful ornamentation. Unlike Graves, Eisenman had a single, focused idea in mind in those years, toward which all these strategies point—the elucidation of “deep structure.”<sup>10</sup> But since “deep structure” is beneath any verbal proposition or definition, it leads the mind nowhere, like the unusable, upside-down Connecticut stairwell in Eisenman's *House VI* (1976). In Graves, Eisenman, and their colleagues, the Modernist addiction to style is maintained. Further, the Post-Modernists—at this phase—deserted Modernism's redeeming virtue, its preoccupation with function, which potentially led beyond form toward meaning, toward the adjustment of form to use. We corrupt the very meaning of the term “metaphor”—not to say “allusion” and “symbol”—when we use them to distinguish Post-Modernism from late Modernism. Both accept and employ codes that are as reductive, as conventional, as structure itself. In Graves, and in Eisenman's early work, we are still trapped inside the signifier, gasping and choking.

*Metaphor is for most . . . a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish. . . . Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of words rather than thought or action. . . . We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system . . . is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.*

—George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 1981

Fragments of a recent correspondence between the author and George Lakoff:

*Davis (August 23, 1981): “Just warming up. You and Mark [Johnson] argue over and over again that metaphors evolve out of their cultural condition. ARGUMENT IS WAR in our society, or so our figures tell us (‘I demolished his argument,’ ‘Your claims are indefensible,’ etc.). But I defy you to separate figurative from literal in these cases, and others. Here, now, in this society, at this time, ARGUMENT IS WAR. I don’t believe that the two worlds brought together in the metaphor are clear. What is really interesting about metaphors, similes, symbols is precisely that they aren’t sure, clean, or precise. They aren’t as objectively easy to grasp as the flat surface of a painting or the shape of the support behind the canvas. [Clement] Greenberg once objected to the discussion of content in art because no one could agree on its definition. But the presence of content—like the presence of any contradictory reality—can’t be denied because it’s difficult to define.”*

*Lakoff (September 2, 1981): “The words ‘literal’ and ‘figurative’ come with baggage. Heavy baggage. To buy into the folk theories behind the ordinary use of these words is to accept a view of art that at its best is degrading to art and, more, typically, denies what you and I would probably agree is central to art: the creation of new meanings, new realities, and new ways of seeing and understanding; experimentation and a search for truth. By those terms, art will always turn out to be ‘figurative’ unless it is understood as representational, in which case it will be judged by how well it fits reality. The only way to get out of this bind is to break down those folk theories that hide behind words like ‘literal and figurative’ and offer an alternative.”*

*The situations in which I say I-love-you cannot be classified: I-love-you is irrepressible and unforeseeable. . . . I-love-you belongs neither in the realm of linguistics nor in that of semiology. . . .*

—Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 1977

*But at the moment of reaching the essence of Photography in general, I branched off: instead of following the path of a formal ontology, of a Logic, I stopped, keeping with me, like a treasure, my desire or my grief; the anticipated essence of the Photograph could not, in my mind, be separated from the “pathos” of which, from the first glance, it consists. I was like that friend who had turned to Photography only because it allowed him to photograph his son. As Spectator I was interested in Photography only for “sentimental” reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think.*

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1980

If the Marquette Building is an early clue to the resolution of our riddle, Roland Barthes' final pair of books are the last. In *A Lover's Discourse* he comes dangerously close to endowing language with extraterritorial claims. In *Camera Lucida* he deserts structural analysis entirely. Instead of probing for the public signification that results from the photograph, he resolves instead upon a private quest. If each photograph is based on a general and objective field of discourse (apparent to every viewer)—the *studium*—it is violated or “punctured” time and again by a private meaning (“this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me”). Since this *punctum* is entirely solipsistic in nature—Barthes' reading of his mother's death in an early portrait, for example—it revolutionizes the meaning of photography, heretofore considered the most public of mediums. Barthes does not deny this public dimension, this *studium* (or “general study,” in Latin). James Van Der Zee's *Family Portrait*, 1926, is immediately perceived to be a “study” of the middle-class black family. But down at the feet of the married daughter Barthes detects a pair of incongruous *strapped pumps*, violating their context, a *punctum*, in other words—a “string, speck, cut, little hole.” The same is true for William Klein's famous photograph of adults and children playing with a toy gun in Little Italy in 1954 (“What I stubbornly see are one child's bad teeth”), and in André Kertész's equally familiar 1921 picture of a blind gypsy led by a boy (“I recognize, with my

whole body, the straggling villages I passed through on my long-ago travels in Hungary and Romania”).

Like photography, architecture has been stubbornly perceived on the level of the *studium* only. But a moment's thought reveals the superficiality of this reading. The reality, the speck, the *punctum*, of the Chrysler Building or the local bank does not lie in its material condition or its function but in the eye and subconscious mind of the *Spectator*—the vast audience outside, some of it ephemeral, some of it constant. The more accessible an image, the less likely it is to maintain iconic aloofness. As the eye returns time and again to Diane Arbus' photograph of twin sisters (*Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey*, 1966), posed before the camera, or to the silver diadem encircling the crest of the Chrysler Building, each grows increasingly more intimate, more familiar. They lose objecthood; they lose distance. Both the photograph and the skyscraper are too pervasive to be owned, kept, secluded. I claim that this transformation has already occurred in most of us for Philip Johnson's AT&T Building, which became a memory—through the photographic dissemination of the model—before it was born.

The great task of the architect is to prevision memory—that is, to issue a building as if it were a photograph, enfolded with the trace of personal conception. In part, this is the key to the Marquette Building's power, which has its source in its unexpected mural. The years and brilliant placement have endowed the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings with an exploding system of *puncta*, wounding millions of spectators each year, for whom they are instinctive totems. The AT&T Building's status is a factor of timing, of a radical mixture of elements (from the classical arch to the 18th-century Chippendale roof) that render it comic (and therefore personal, like a private joke) rather than iconic. AT&T is magnificently flawed, like Alexander Gardner's photograph of one of the doomed assassins of Lincoln, in whose face Barthes discovers “*a catastrophe which has already occurred*” (italics in original). It is this latent, unexplored power of architecture that has been ignored in Post-Modernist, revivalist theory. To continue to ignore it—after *Camera Lucida* or after AT&T—is worse than tragic. We cannot hope to read

architecture in any manner beyond conventional semiotics—or resolve its riddle—unless we heed the effect of the *punctum*, not to say the punctured public itself.

*For . . . earlier artists [Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, et al.] . . . the line between the audience and themselves was clear, if complex. Their agony about the mediation and reception—the recognition, in the deepest sense—of their art is a part of their refusal to serve the audience’s self-idealizing aims. . . . For contemporary artists who have spent the last two decades obsessed with the question of media—some of them have become entertainers of sorts—the issue of art and its public has become overwhelming in its uncertainty because they want to be credible as avant-garde or critical and at the same time to serve and be loved by an audience.*

—Donald Kuspit, 1982<sup>11</sup>

The winds of nostalgia that whistled through Donald Kuspit’s essay in these pages the year before last are inhaled by all of us each day and further inhibit the reading—and writing—of architecture, of any “public” art. We sense it again in Kenneth Frampton’s recent essay, when he laments with Andreas Huyssens the death of a “critical adversary culture,” the presumed task of the vanguard. What makes it nostalgic? Because these positions presume—indeed, some long for—an audience that no longer exists, i.e., the early bourgeois throngs who shouted down the Impressionist paintings hung in the Paris salons of the 1860s. The contemporary audience, primed by art history, by the telling and retelling of the Impressionist saga, by an instantaneous perception of events, reproductions, and theories, forms an entirely new reality. This fact is precisely why the adoption of a “public” mode of action or design widens the possibility of private, privileged, and critical discourse. The success of Eisenman’s difficult and brilliant design, unanimously approved by the jurors and the Ohio public, is but the latest proof in point. The task of vanguard art and architecture at this moment—the moment we live in, as opposed to the 1860s, where we do not live—is



hardly to shock a public inured to shock, to alienate a public that begins in deep alienation, fomented by military, ecological, and media violence.

We must revise our figurative understanding of the avant-garde as a kind of swarthy boxer engaged in a slugging match under klieg lights with a small army of heavy-footed adversaries. Now he or she is a dancer engaged in a duet in which each partner leads and follows at once and where the final moves are unpredictable. “Immediate” is the turning adjective here, because yet another aspect of our cultural condition is the rapid dissemination of both stylistic innovation and theoretical structures. The quantitative aspects of this change are deeply qualitative in their effects. The numbers involved in our duet are many times larger than those of their predecessors in the last century. The existence of a plethora of book-length biographical, critical, and historical studies of contemporary artists, scarce in the days of Manet and the Beaux-Arts architects, is a signal difference. For each biting, sarcastic review or article published then, a great many more appear in the 1980s. This equation does not even admit such media as magazines, lectures, and television. Avant-garde cycles are consequently more rapid as a matter of daily informational reality. If we concede that the contemporary audience is attentive to the nuances of innovation, the exhaustion rate is quicker as well. Portlandia now seems a century old (though she won’t be installed until the autumn of 1984) and a candidate, as Frampton alleges, for Kitsch. Check our metaphor; the vanguard architect is engaged in hundreds of duets before a public that moves rapidly from one freestanding podium to the next. By ignoring this reality, Kuspit and others unintentionally pin our perceptions down in a lost world. Rather than invent its rejection, original art and architecture invent its acceptance, that is, its public.

When placed before an immense audience conceived in this manner—as opposed to the nostalgic gathering of dolts—the “public” mode preserves its privacy more readily than the “private” mode. Why? Because the accessible image—the book, the film, the telecast, the building—is the internal captive of many minds, through memory, while the reality of the painting is its privileged commodity status, reinforced by the cultural codes that surround

it. More than any of these mediums, architecture has the power to puncture this acutely private realm.

*Neo-modernism is producing some of the finest construction of the 1980's.*

—Ada Louise Huxtable, 1982<sup>12</sup>

*Le Corbusier is, in some ways, the most catholic and ingenious of eclectics. The orders, the Roman references, were the traditional architectural clothing of authority; and, if it is hard for the modern architect to be quite so emphatic as was Palladio about the Roman, with Le Corbusier there is always the element of wit. . . .*

—Colin Rowe, 1947<sup>13</sup>

At the end of his determinedly structuralist examination of *The Fashion System* (1967), Barthes identified “*neomania*” with the coming of the Renaissance. In any case, by 1975, the drive to find and exploit the “new” in clothing was a symptom of stability. It responded on the level of style to a deep societal rhythm and of course involved a dense, intuitive manipulation of symbols and meanings in terms of a code which ironically denied its signification, not to say its importance. At this moment we are engaging *neomania* on a different level. The prefix *neo* has replaced *post* as a declarative element in the avant-garde duet. In addition to neo-Ex and neo-Avant-Garde, we have lately contracted for neo-Modernism. The rejection of *post* might be thought of as a reflexive response to boredom, to irritation, to the neo-conservative overkill of its adversaries (a few months ago James Marston Fitch, the Bernard Berenson of restoration, assailed the fashionable rejection of the art and architecture of the first half of this century as “irrational and reactionary”<sup>14</sup>). But I see this transformation of prefix as a rejection not of post-modernism itself but of the attempt by many of its propagandists to desert the progressive Modern era for history-as-style, as opposed to history-as-meaning.

In its place, *neomania* is fulfilling a complex of long-repressed needs—for the hard rock of function-as-defined-by-the-user, for structural simplicity that opens up form to multiple readings and purposes. The gridded glass spine in Eisenman's design turns this figure into literal fact. Unlike the inflexible high-Modern tower, Eisenman's grid lies low, opens its uses to the pedestrians who stream through its glass walkway, and declares itself (in the interior progression of galleries) to be "open," not closed. Frank Gehry's "Temporary Contemporary" museum, recently opened in Los Angeles, is a similarly free space, confined simply by the structure of the warehouse that preceded it, lying intentionally open and vulnerable—unlike the heavily articulated High Museum in Atlanta (by Richard Meier), which is studded with arresting columns, obtrusive walls, and cutout windows. In his praise of Renzo Piano's endless gridded enclosure for the Milan Trade Fair, Aldo Rossi acclaims this willingness to break the "utopia of Form" and cede the making of spaces to its occupants. Of course such forms recall Modernism in their simplicity, but not in their open-field complexity.

Eisenman, Rossi, and Piano break further from the semiotic trap—and neo-Kantian idealism—by conceding the context of recall and the inevitability of wit, if not comedy. It is the *Ohio State* armory that is remembered in the resurrected towers (moved just to the south of their original site, with low walls marking the outline of the original foundation), not "history" as an absolute. That the towers are nondescript and derivative in their nature is part of the straight-faced joke. In a condition where every perceiver can be counted on to understand (or research) the differing orders of history and architecture, the joke is on the towers, as AT&T's joke is on Chippendale. Appropriation can only become a functional critical term in a neo-avant-garde condition where the audience and the artist are locked together inside a private punch line, based in quotation. Corbusier played a similar joke at the Villa Savoie, 1928–29, which mocks the classical orders. There, eclecticism is in the firm control of wit and use. Though normally interpreted as prim and puritanical, Aldo Rossi's school at Fagnano di Olena, near Milan (1972), seems to me a brilliant foretaste of neo-Modern comedy. A fat, choleric cylinder, it sits in the schoolyard like a bulging tumor

surgically separated from another building. Strong, large, simple, its huge front window seems to be an entrance arch but isn't. There is no entrance! And here, here—as in the movable armory—is the *punctum*, the Neomaniacal *punctum*, reaching out to an indeterminate point beyond the structure, beyond the signifier-signified duality. No longer is the sign its own code, in Fagnano di Olena, in Columbus, Ohio. The code is finally freed—to find meaning beyond its medium.

*Who could deny that the patterned wood-and-plaster ceiling of [Frank Lloyd Wright's] Coonley living room—like a marvelous reverse print of the actual framing—looks unlike anything that had ever been built before?*

—James Marston Fitch, 1983<sup>15</sup>

*Sorry.*

This is the last sentence of the story. This is the last sentence of the story.  
This is the last sentence of the story.

This is.

Sorry.

—Douglas R. Hofstadter, 1982<sup>16</sup>

The current discourse on architecture is fatally handicapped by more than its obsession with style. There is the refusal to admit to the needs of innovation. The issue is not that new is better but that the new—considering the condition of the culture—is inevitable. Michael Graves argued at a recent Harvard colloquium that the Visual Arts Center in Columbus doesn't derive from the *culture of architecture*. Ironically, this is precisely why it makes the clean and crucial break. We can never be “Modern” again but we can, we must, be “modernly” (an obsolete term deserving revival; it simply means an

event enfolded in the present tense, a *modernly action*). Ohio State cuts the semiotic chain that is this “culture of architecture.” It is the same cut made in the last century by the Marquette Building, alone among the early Chicago-Modern skyscrapers. Both structures violate architecture-as-medium. Certainly we no longer expect paintings, poems, films, videotapes, performances to simply realize their conditions. We expect them to move, wound, pierce. Architecture exists not only in its physical state—its *studium*—but in its psychic reception—its *punctum*. The lesson taught in *Camera Lucida* about the photograph is directly applicable to all public media, including film, television, and live performance. It rescues architecture from the trap laid by universalist semiotics. It solves the riddle posed in Chicago in 1894 and raised again in Columbus, Ohio, almost a century later. When the medium contradicts itself—by reaching out beyond its functional, structural, or philosophical limits—it triumphs, as an act of culture. Architecture is transformed, in brief, when it ceases to regard itself as architecture. Of course this lesson has been ignored in the twilight of Post-Modernism. But that simply argues for another and finer evolution. Let me refute the final self-referential sentence: This is the end of an essay that is only beginning.

*Douglas Davis is an artist, critic, and filmmaker.*

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## NOTES

1. Aldo Rossi, “The Well Tempered Environment,” *Domus*, April 1983.
2. Vittorio Gregotti, text of lecture given at Architectural League, New York, October 1982, reprinted in *Oculus*, November 1982.
3. David Handlin, handout for “The International Style in Perspective,” conference at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard university, April 16–17, 1982.

4. Cf. George Lakoff and John Robert Ross, "Is Deep Structure Necessary?," in *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 7, 1976, pp 159–64.
5. Alan Colquhoun, "From *Bricolage* to Myth, or How to Put Humpty-Dumpty Together Again," *Oppositions* 12, Spring 1978.
6. J. Stewart Johnson, "The new antiques: art deco and modernism," *Antiques*, January 1972.
7. Mario Gandelsonas, "On Reading Architecture," *Progressive Architecture*, March 1972.
8. B.J. Archer, "New York" in quattro sul Post-modern," *Domus*, February 1981.
9. Kenneth Frampton "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in Hal Foster, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Port Townsend, Wash: Bay Press, 1983.
10. In 1976, in "Post-Functionalism," Eisenman specifically allied himself with the "non-objective abstract painting of Malevich and Mondrian the non- narrative, atemporal writing of Joyce and Apollinaire . . . the atonal and polytonal compositions of Schönberg and Webern . . . the non-narrative films of Richter and Eggeling." At its core, this manifesto argues for an architecture of absence and negation, based in a vision at once structuralist and apocalyptic, with the familiar implications of deep structure lurking always beneath the surface of the rhetoric. Here is Eisenman quoting Levi-Strauss: "Language, an unreflecting totalization, is human reason which has its reason and of which man knows nothing.' It is this condition of displacement which gives rise to design in which authorship can no longer account for the invention of form—hence the abstract as a mediation between pre-existent sign systems." *Oppositions* (Vol. 6).

11. Donald Kuspit, "Audience and the Avant-Garde." *Artforum*, December 1982.

12. Ada Louise Huxtable, "The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered," *The New Criterion*, November 1982.

13. Colin Rowe, "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa," *Architectural Review*, 1947.

14. James Marston Fitch, "To Tell the Truth," *Metropolis*, October 1983.

15. Fitch, "To Tell the Truth."

16. Douglas R. Hofstadter, "Metamagical Themas," *Scientific American*, January 1982.



















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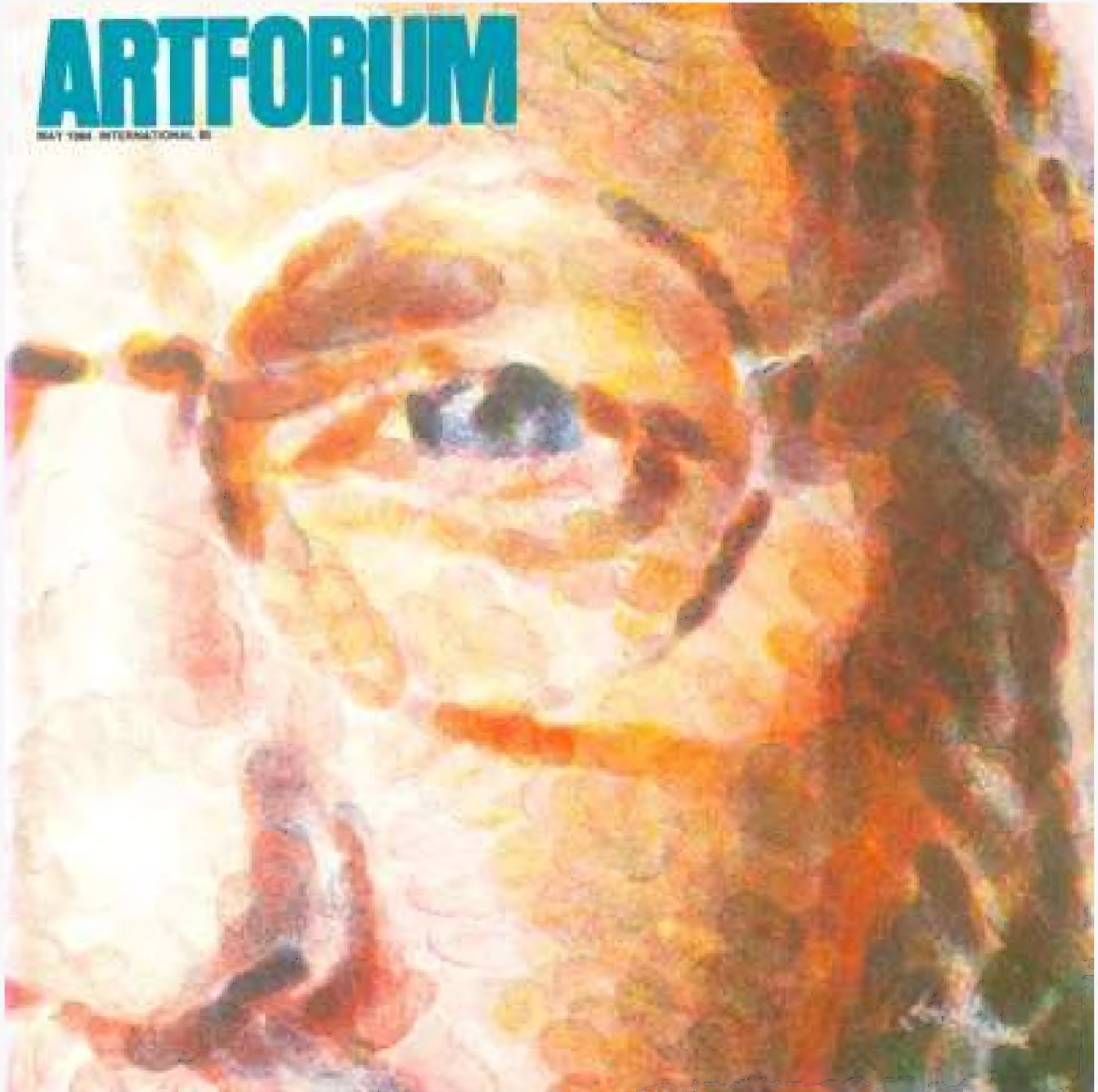
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Chuck Close, *John/Fingerprint* (detail), 1983, lithography ink on paper, 48 x 38¼".

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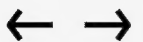
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